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The War Against Infectious Diseases

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By Capt. David B. Service, U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit No. 6 (Lima, Peru)



CAPT David B. Service, commanding officer, U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit No. 6, Peru, gets piped aboard during his change of command ceremony, Nov. 22 (NAMRU-6 photo by Monica Barrera)

(There comes a time at the end of every Naval Officer's military career to hang up the uniform and start a new chapter in life. For Capt. David B. Service, commanding officer of the U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit No. 6 (NAMRU-6) that transition began with a change of command ceremony, followed by a retirement ceremony, Nov. 22, 2013, the culminated 31 years of faithful military service to this great nation. Service began his naval journey at the Officer Candidate Aviator School (AOCS) in Pensacola, Fla., where he received his commission as an Ensign in 1985. Following AOCS, he earned his wings as a Naval Flight Officer subsequently serving as a bombardier/navigator on the A-6E "Intruder." He then transferred to the Medical Service Corps as a redesignated Naval Aerospace Physiologist. His diverse background afforded the right mix of military acumen, strategic vision, and diplomatic and interagency skills to lead NAMRU-6.)


Irrespective of which country a military serves, the core purpose of a country's armed forces is to protect and defend their countrymen using force. Given the obvious absence of weapons and other tools of war on this beautiful navy base in Callao, Peru, it is not uncommon for people to wonder what our conflict is here that has been NAMRU-6's safe harbor for 30 years.


What battle could we possibly be fighting? The startling answer is that NAMRU-6 and our allies are engaged in the long war against debilitating infectious diseases. These diseases have


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killed more people than all the bombs dropped and all the bullets fired in all the wars every fought by man. These diseases constitute an enemy that has no respect for borders or treaties, and is more tenacious and ruthless than any human foe.

Our defensive strategy requires agility to respond to changing tactics and capabilities, such as a pathogen’s resistance to long established drugs and therapies or a transmutation that allows it to jump from one species to another. Our strategy requires regional allies, a militia made up of expert Latin American partners engaged in protecting their homeland here on the front lines where enemy diseases infiltrate the communities and jungles.

This long war requires battle-hardened veterans and strong young recruits who have the tenacity, drive, intelligence, and courage to pursue the fight, even in the face of odds that would weaken the resolve of many warriors. The enemy includes pandemic threats such as influenza that can overrun a nation like an invading armada. Respiratory infections that kill more than half the people they come in contact with and fanatical extremists such as dengue, malaria, and rabies that refuse to surrender even after hundreds of years of opposition.

How do we assemble a crew willing to sail to battle in the face of such adversity? In the U.S. Navy military structure, NAMRU-6 operates like a ship of the line, and like a ship it is made up of departments and divisions that each contribute to the combat capability of the vessel. Each is a vital element and none can accomplish its own specialized function without the mutual support of the other elements that are also part of the ship. On the NAMRU-6 ship, the crew is made up of dedicated Peruvians and Americans who are the best and most highly skilled people available. At the core of every ship is the operations center, and at NAMRU-6 the mission, the operation, is tropical disease research. Those operations are executed by an incredibly talented group of dedicated scientists and technicians who are among the best in the world at what they do.

Our bacteriology team is led by Lt. Cmdr. Hamilton Tilley, an accomplished Navy physician and fleet-seasoned officer with an unlimited capacity for extra work. Our emerging infections department (EID) headed by Dr. Dan Bausch is the equivalent of a multi-warhead missile. His EID team goes against multiple targets at the same time by responding to outbreaks, monitoring and analyzing disease activity and pursuing pathogen discovery in a myriad of vectors, including small furry rodents.

All ships wage an ongoing battle against pests, including insects, and NAMRU-6 is no different, except that our fight extends well outside the ship’s lifelines and into the jungle. Led by Cmdr. Fred Stell and Dra. Gisella Vasquez, the command’s crack entomology team excels at capturing and studying the mosquitoes and flies that transmit force-crippling disease such as dengue and leishmaniasis. Closely aligned is the parasitology team headed by Dr. Will (Willy) Lescano and Lt. Vince Gerbasi. In addition to the world-wide campaign they wage against malaria, I also consider Willy to be NAMRU-6’s de facto Navy Academy Superintendent. His leadership in developing extensive scientific training programs helps ensure a steady influx of up-and-coming epidemiologists and technicians to join the fight across Peru and Latin America. Our virology program is a disease juggernaut of our operations. The virology team of special forces investigators include renown experts.

No ship goes anywhere without a navigator and NAMRU-6 is incredibly fortunate to have a science director as esteemed as Dr. Claudio Lanata to help plot its course. With his experience in international waters and steady hand next to mine on the rudder we safely navigated regulatory reefs and political shoals while charting courses to new research opportunities across Latin America.

My ship’s squadron and fleet commanders are here on the quarterdeck with me today, Capt. John Sanders, commanding officer of the [Naval Medical Research Center](#), and Rear Adm. Eduardo Novoa, Peruvian Navy Surgeon General. For the ship’s First Officer, I was blessed to

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be teamed with one of the brightest physicians in Navy Medicine, Capt. Kyle Petersen. As NAMRU-6’s executive officer he set a tempo and tone for the crew that left no questions about expectations of performance or the execution of details. With his experience he has gained it is clear that he is the right choice to be NAMRU-6’s next master and commander.

To all my NAMRU-6 shipmates, you follow the Navy ethos as if they are direct orders. You are honorable in your sense of duty to the science and ethics of human research, courageous and unwavering in the defense of the health of your countrymen, and absolutely committed to the victory of our critical research mission. It was a privilege to serve with you on the NAMRU-6 ship, and an honor to be your commanding officer.

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